

December 2, 1963

Dr. R. C. Backus, Chief
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National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda 14, Maryland

Dear Dr. Backus:

Your letter of November 12 was most welcome. In spite of its grave substantive news, your frank expression of a problem is a refreshing change from much of the bureaucratic nonsense to which we have been recently exposed. I understand the implications of this remark; and I hope you will take it as a real measure of the exasperation to which we (and I think I do speak for many investigators) have been driven by recent events. I think it is important that we return to a common purpose in meeting these responsibilities and understanding of the underlying problems.

Needless to say, you will have my full cooperation. Actually, I am personally conservative about the value of foreign travel, and have not encouraged this except where there are substantial needs to communicate with people doing closely related work. In past years (happily much less, more recently) I have had some occasions for foreign travel, but you might be interested that grant funds have been used for only a minor portion of any trip. Regardless of my personal bias, however, I would be most reluctant to impose an arbitrary regime either upon myself or upon my colleagues that excluded reasonable and sympathetic consideration of each case.

In the course of time I believe it may be possible to restore the mutual confidence to remotivate an urgent sense of responsibility on the part of investigators to insure the most prudent use of public funds, with a corresponding reposition of confidence in investigators. That there has been a breakdown in such confidence is doubly unfortunate; in many instances rigorous compliance with NIH regulations enforces wasteful expenditure of funds. Insofar as the system does not confide in the use of my conscientious judgment, the responsible administration of a project demands a more mechanistic provision in advance for the innumerable contingencies that invariably arise in the prosecution of research. To that extent an over-regulated system will lead to considerable waste, even in purely fiscal terms, not to mention the waste of effort which is entailed in the preoccupation of people with myself on matters for which we are less than ideally qualified.

I am not being at all ironic in reacting that I am delighted at your policy position that the Institute will handle exigent requests for foreign travel on a day-to-day basis. If we could be sure of prompt reaction to real needs

as they arise, we should encourage budgets and expenditures to be formulated in the most flexible manner possible to allow for the realities of scientific research, namely the occurrence of the unpredictable. Real requirements for accountability can then be met by timely consultation along the lines you suggest. What is so frustrating about the present situation is not the basic need for administrative regulation, with the aim of preventing the unhappy abuses that can creep into any system, but the administrative framework which results in such long delays in order to make any modification in our program. In the matter of equipment, for example, we are thus caught between the requirement to specify as long as a year in advance what specific instruments will be needed in order to meet observations that have not yet been made, and the realities of scientific life that the most interesting discoveries are precisely the unpredictable ones. A solution would be the construction of a grant as an allowance of a general framework of expenditure in relation to the assessed values of the indicated work. This should comprise just as accurate a prediction as the investigator is able to offer as to his continuing needs, but be revised subject to your prompt specification and approval as these needs materialize during the budget year.

Nothing would delight me more than the opportunity to compete with other claims upon available funds on the basis of the immediate legitimacy of our requirements and the significance of our work, rather than the efficiency with which we do our paper work and how well we act out our fantasies as to our requirements so many months away.

Cordially,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics